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OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Free-Market Feminism 101

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“Feminism,” says the bumper sticker on my old Buick, “is the radical notion that women are people.” Feminism doesn’t *have* to be an angry academic sect descended from burners of bras (though I can tell you right now, the bra burners were onto something). It doesn’t *have* to be radical lesbian separatism, for example, or a musty version of socialism.

People are always getting into quarrels about the Essential Meaning of X. Never mind that if 20th-century philosophy has taught us anything (there is some debate among critics of 20th-century philosophy) it is that meanings do not lie around like pebbles to be picked up but are social agreements, like definitions of the word “hominid” or “income.” Yet it is still the case that one of the most effective of rhetorical devices is to define away your opponents with an Essential Meaning. You know the device. If someone defines what you do as “not [Essentially] economics” then she doesn’t have to listen to you. Or answer your objections.

We need to resist such unreasoned exclusion. So for the time being let feminism be merely that broad-church notion, about two centuries old, that women, like children and captives of war and yearly servants in husbandry, are people. That is, they are not—as had been believed by everyone until some bourgeois Christians in the middle of the 18th century started talking up another social agreement—chattels at the wills of their masters. The broad definition of feminism doesn’t exclude. It leaves the big questions open for listening and objecting and persuading, instead of answering them before they are asked.

I want to persuade you that feminism is worth the attention of economists, even male economists, even free market male economists. The big questions from an audience of male economists sceptical about feminism are two. “Why, first, would it matter that women are also economic agents? Don’t the women agents make decisions the same way men do? And why, second, would it matter that women are economists? Don’t women economists take derivatives the same way male economists do?”

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The econometrician and international economist Ed Leamer asked me these questions at a sweet luncheon with him and Ken Sokoloff and Armen Alchian five years ago at the UCLA faculty club. Since then I've been turning over the possible answers, getting a tiny bit clearer why Ed's implied answers (No and No, which is why we have no particular need for more women in economics and for a feminist economics) are wrong.

What's the right answer to Ed's sceptical questions? Briefly, yes, women act in the economy and in the science like men, but not in ways that leaves gender outside the science. Economic agents do not in fact behave in the little-boy way that Max U does; introducing Maxine U has the effect, to use an idea of Albert Hirschman's, of usefully "complicating" economics. Men and women behave (roughly) the same way in response to constraints, but the way is not well captured for many problems by Max U alone. And, yes, women economists take derivatives the same way men economists do. But women put less faith in derivative-taking as an entire account of economic behavior. Likewise sensible men. My replies to the big questions can be summed up this way: the little boys' rules for economic behavior or science (Greed is Good; use only Max U; ignore the complexities of human character beyond pure prudence) are not what grown-ups, male or female, in life or science, actually practice. Feminism draws attention to the grown-up practices of the economy and of economics.

Take for example my version of feminism (please), postmodern free-market feminism. Set aside for another occasion a discussion of what I could possibly mean by "postmodernism" (if you want the short form it's that same discovery I mention in 20th-century philosophy: that meanings do not lie around but are made; if you want the long form you'll have to read the exciting new book on pomo economics edited by Steve Cullenberg, Jack Amariglio, and David Ruccio, out next year from Routledge). Being a *free-market* feminist means simply that you do not think treating women like human beings (and treating men the same way) is necessarily an anticapitalist project. It has been so historically. For a long time we have assumed that being feminist means being against Rockefeller and Gates and being in favor of rent control and government-to-government foreign aid. But it doesn't have to be. Such a free-market feminism is not popular (to see how unpopular look at the amazing flame war that Donald [to Deirdre's embarrassment] was involved in some years back on FemEcon). We free-market feminists could fit into a large phone booth. Wendy McElroy (e.g. her edited collection, *Freedom, Feminism, and the State: An Overview of Individualist Feminism* [2nd ed., 1991]) and Joan Taylor Kennedy, *Reclaiming the Mainstream: Individualist Feminism Rediscovered* [1992] were pioneers. I am going to organize a big conference about the economics involved as soon as I can find a big enough number of people to invite. A dozen? A score? I keep running into them, an assistant professor here, a consultant there. But they are few. (Free-market feminists of the world, unite! And tell me [deirdre2@uic.edu] where you are!)

What's grown-up about free-market feminism? Well, it acknowledges the embedded character of economic agents (as the sociologists say) and yet it does not conclude therefore that the capitalist bedding needs to be torn off the bed and thrown away. On the contrary, it argues that the market has been the chief road for the liberation of women (as of poor men). "We have to give up the idea," Kennedy writes, "that we can

force others, either personally or by using the power of government, to treat us as we would wish" [242]. Deals, not laws, point the way out of slavery.

I could go on. But my thoughts on feminism—except the thought that we ought to take it a lot more seriously than we do in economics—are not worth much. I'm no big-time theorist of feminism. For that even in economics you'll need to read Julie Nelson (*Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics* [1996]) or Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson, eds., *Beyond Economic Man* [1993; you may omit the essay by Donald McCloskey] or their new volume forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press or the amazing new journal founded and edited by Diana Strassmann, *Feminist Economics*. Being a woman, even a new one, does not equip you for the big time. You need to do a lot of reading and talking and listening. The conversation has become rich, and I have only dipped into some of the literatures, such as Christian feminism or feminism and science.

Let me tell you, though, of a few books you can read to get started as I have. The books by the handful of economic feminists I mention are one list. Add to this work on the economics and economic history of women, such as Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap* [1990] and the superb textbook by Fran Blau, Marianne A. Ferber, and Anne Winkler, *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work* [1998]. Another and necessary list is that of classics, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* [1792] or Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* [1931; I read Goldman as a kid in the local Carnegie Library, which is a nice irony: capitalism's enemy gets read compliments of Andrew Carnegie]. Also necessary are the modern classics—the books everyone is referring to even when they hate them—such as Simone de Beauvoir (that unreliable memoirist), *The Second Sex* [1949], Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* [1963], Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* [1982], or Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* [1990; Tannen is a serious academic linguist; see *Gender and Discourse*, 1994].

There's a gigantic amount to read, a lot of listening to be done. We are only just beginning to realize how much we've missed by stifling women's voices all these centuries past. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty wrote once [1983, 562] that what is crucial is "our ability to engage in continuous conversation, testing one another, discovering our hidden presuppositions, changing our minds because we have listened to the voices of our fellows. Lunatics also change their minds, but their minds change with the tides of the moon and not because they have listened, really listened, to their friends' questions and objections." It's time for our dismal little science to listen, really listen to what half of humanity (and a lot of men, too) are saying.

REFERENCES

- Rorty, A. O. Experiments in Philosophical Genre: Descartes' *Meditations*." *Critical Inquiry*, March 1983, 545-65.